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ABSTRACT

This article describes a campaign for the passage of a 1989 bond referendum for the construction of two elementary schools in rural Lunenburg County, Virginia. The article, written from the perspective of a neophyte school superintendent, offers a demographic description of the county, describes various voter groups, and provides a chronology of events surrounding eventual passage of the referendum. Groups perceived as supporting the referendum included the black community, the middle class, parents, and the local school board. Groups originally assumed to oppose the bond issue included large landowners, who would be shouldering a disproportionate share of the tax increase, and retirees originally from other more urban areas who may have lacked allegiance to the local schools or the county itself. A school board-directed campaign of speeches, letters, and community-based organizing was used to support the bond issue referendum, which passed in every precinct. The paper concludes with recommendations for similar campaigns that emphasize the importance of grass-roots organizing, establishing the "moral high ground," focusing on the district's true needs, and starting the voter-education process early. (TES)

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THE LANDSLIDE PASSAGE OF A SEVEN MILLION DOLLAR SCHOOL BOND REFERENDUM IN RURAL VIRGINIA

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THE LANDSLIDE PASSAGE OF A SEVEN MILLION DOLLAR SCHOOL BOND REFERENDUM IN RURAL VIRGINIA

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Author's Note: Written from the perspective of a neophyte superintendent of schools, this article is intended as a narrative description not as a recipe for success.

DESCRIPTION

Lunenburg County, Virginia is located in Southside, Virginia, which is a rural region south/southwest of Richmond, between that city and the North Carolina state line. Lunenburg, with a population of 12,000 people supported a bond referendum on November 7, 1989, to build two new elementary schools with 79.4 percent of the voting population in favor and only 20.6 percent opposed.

Until fairly recent years, the lumber industry and tobacco farming have economically dominated Lunenburg County. As these two areas of economic potential have diminished, residents have tended to move away from the county or to commute to nearby cities and towns for employment. However, a growing base of employment through a number of industries has developed in the last five to ten years, largely in the area of furniture manufacturing.

Lunenburg County has well-defined social perameters affecting not only the socio-economic flexibility within the county but also race relations among its residents. Lunenburg County schools are approximately 53 percent white and 47 percent black with virtually no other minorities represented in the district. As a whole, the population averages below the norm in income, with the county as an entity falling largely in the lower dectile

economically, compared to other geo-political subdivisions in the state of Virginia.

Throughout the process of proselitizing for a successful vote on the referendum, an important factor emerged: the county residents have a very positive attitude toward their schools and realize the potential impact schools have on the local economy and on the social life of the community as a whole.

VARIOUS VOTER GROUPS

The identification of specific voter groups initiated the efforts to rally support for the school referendum. These support groups fell into four general categories:

1. The black population of the county. Because the black clergy wholeheartedly supported education, they approached the issue with vigor and imagination. An estimated 90 to 95 percent of the black vote was favorable.

2. The middle class population. In general the middle class population supported the schools, even if they did not have children presently enrolled, as the obvious impact the new schools can have economically and socially on the community was evident to this group. The apparent support of this group was about 85 to 90 percent on election day.

3. Parents of school age children. A straw vote at the high school indicated that 85 percent of this group was favorable, regardless of race or socio-economic status.

4. The local school board. By diligently and tirelessly working throughout the entire process, the Lunenburg County School Board led the drive for a successful referendum on the concept of new schools.

The support of two groups - leaders in business and industry and the elected Board of Supervisors - seemed uncertain according to mixed signals early in the referendum process; however, by the end of the process, some of these persons proved to be our strongest allies. Other groups whom we assumed to be negative toward the issue at the beginning were:

1. Large land owners. This group would have to pay a disproportionate share of the tax increase, therefore, the costs of the project were of concern to this group.

2. Retired citizens. A large number of people in this group were people who had moved into Lunenburg County from other more urban areas. In general, these "newcomers" potentially lacked an allegiance to the schools or to the county itself.

Determining exactly how the members of the negative groups voted is impossible; however, the fact that even the areas heavily made up of potentially negative groups voted in favor of the referendum indicates that our original concerns may have been unfounded.

A CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

A search committee was established in Lunenburg County in the winter of 1988-89. This committee consisted of 20 members of the community selected by both the School Board and the Board of Supervisors. They analyzed a variety of school options and decided our best prospectus was to replace our two schools that were built in the 1920's with one elementary school in one section of the county and a second elementary school in another, hopefully meeting the needs then of the entire county. This plan would transform our school structure from two (K, 1-2) schools, two (3-6) schools, one (7 & 8) junior high, and one (9-12) high school to two K-5 schools, one 6-8 middle school, and one 9-12 high school. The School Board finally accepted and approved this approach, and the voters placed their faith on this option at the polls.

In the spring of 1989 the Board of Supervisors accepted the option of having the new schools built and began to debate the prospect of a referendum; however, the final decision was not made until July of 1989. I was hired as Superintendent of Schools in May of 1989 and began to work at the end of June, 1989. This referendum was the first major issue that I faced.

I based my approach entirely upon instinct. I had no prior experience with or any involvement in referenda. In fact, I have neither lived nor worked in a school community where a referendum issue was necessary for

the building of schools. The state of Virginia does not require a referendum on school buildings, but the local supervisory board or city council can follow that procedure, if they wish. We immediately began to make an earnest effort to seek passage of the bond issue by making speeches and writing letters to the sources of leadership in the community; teachers, clergymen, businessmen, managerial leadership in various industries, independent professionals, and all the social and civic organizations in Lunenburg County.

Several letters importuning support were sent early, midway, and toward the latter stages of the campaign, each one emphasizing a different perspective. Our basic aim was to reach the moral high ground and to emphasize not only the educational advantage to the students but also the safety advantage to students of being in new schools. The economic impact and social benefits to the entire community were also stressed and, of course, costs were discussed in general terms, because specific information was not available until very late in what became a political campaign. Eventually, from late July until early November, I was able to speak to 52 different groups and organizations and addressed approximately 1000 different people.

In the interregnum, the County Board of Supervisors hired accounting and architectural firms which worked with the assistance of a team of local advisors, including the County Manager, Superintendent of Schools, two School Board members, two members of the Board of Supervisors, and two citizens. These architects and accountants provided information to the Supervisors and to the public at a public session on October 19th (the election date was November 7th). They indicated for the first time publically the possibilities for the building of the schools, the kind of schools that could be built, and the cost of the construction of new schools. The group also explained the probability of raising taxes and

the sources for the tax increase which was estimated at 25 percent for all taxes (primarily real estate and personal property).

During September and October numerous civic groups and leadership organizations in the county, including but certainly not limited to the two Chambers of Commerce and various PTA and PTO organizations, took public stands for and supported the bond referendum. They also contributed money to an effort which began in late September and truly carried the day for the referendum. A community based organization, "Citizens for New Schools", slowly emerged. Using a small amount of cash resources donated by various organizations, (about $2500), the organization mounted a very effective and very inexpensive campaign to reach the public's attention. Eventually over 300 people became involved in the election.

This campaign included the issuance of bumper stickers and buttons which supported the school issue, numerous letters to the editor written by leading citizens, and advertisements in local newspapers and on the local radio stations, all of which were intensified during the last four to five days of the campaign. Poll workers were recruited in every precinct to hand out red apples with a message attached to each one to "vote yes" for the new schools. The enthusiasm and energy of this group made a tremendous difference in the margin of victory, which most pundits, including the superintendent, felt was a rather close contest until the latter stages. Early projections had simply underestimated the positive vote and overestimated the negative vote, but the committee's impact was very definitive.

The efforts designed by this committee were creative and very professional. A number of the participants had been involved previously in political campaigns and were social activists well known in the county for their service to the community. Because of the committee's success, the election itself went surprisingly well; we carried every precinct in the county,

some by only a handful of votes and others by over 95 percent of the vote. A four to one margin in an election of this type is almost unheard of as referenda issues are normally tightly contested and are lost in a majority of cases.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In retrospect, a number of aspects of this campaign could have been done differently, but, as it turned out, each process ultimately fell into its appropriate place. The issue which concerned me the most prior to the election was the lack of time to organize properly the campaign to develop a community based organization. Nevertheless, we did have a successful closing of the election, and the process did work out well. My concerns were, fortuitously, ill-founded.

After some rumination my recommendations are:

1. Establish a grassroots organization. This, of course, was facilitated by the Citizens for New Schools. I would not recommend waiting until the eleventh hour to arrange this type of organization as we were compelled to do. This group needs to flow naturally out of the needs of the people as perceived by themselves and this is, indeed, what occurred.

2. Reach a moral high ground on the issue. There will always be opposition to spending money and there will always be some opposition to public schools, particularly among certain groups, depending on the community in which you live. However, the issues that: (A) we needed a safe environment for children, and (B) there is value to the community of attractive schools for attracting industry and business into the community were very positive and very practical ones.

3. Place a great deal of emphasis upon true needs. For instance, what will be the result if we build two new community schools in lieu of one central school? In our case, we were able to specify what the results would be in terms of building structure, funding costs, personnel savings, and curricular change that would occur with two schools which ultimately favored two schools.

4. Orient the campaign toward the future. School buildings last 40 to 60 years and even longer. The value of those buildings to affect the community in a positive way for one, two, and even three generations in the future needs to be emphasized.

5. Start the process early. We should have started our process earlier, particularly fact finding in regard to taxes, the building

of schools, and what was available to us. As we encapsulated inordinate effort into a very short period, we were not able to reach the public with accurate information until the last weeks before the election. If you are able to establish a grassroots organization early, a more sophisticated operation in terms of speakers, information, media contact, precinct organization, and so forth, can be generated. In our case, because of a tremendous amount of energy on the parts of the various members of this committee, these things were achieved.

6. Reach the public. A superintendent of schools has to make a significant personal sacrifice and committment to reach the public and to garnering the kind of leadership from others that will make this process successful. You can not do it by yourself, but you must be willing to assert leadership in the face of both real and imaginary obstacles. The superintendent must also be willing to remove his feelings from the process and to view opposition to the project as abstract and non-personal. In essence, long hours and a thick skin are very important attributes.

It is almost incredible, in retrospect, to realize what was done, and done so very well, on what amounted to a shoestring budget and very tight time constraints. While I don't recommend the encapsulated approach which we were forced to utilize, the process and the results were beyond criticism.